Our History

Le Château Montebello

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Le Château Montebello

A Seigniory on the Ottawa River

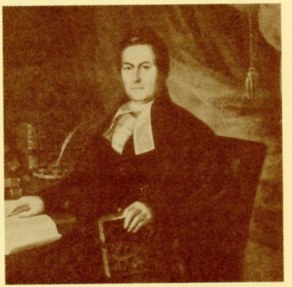
in the Province of Quebec

NOTE: - The following article, which deals with the historical background of Le Château Montebello in the Province of Quebec, may be of interest to our guests.

French Canada is a land of many memories and of strange contrasts. The traditions arising from the origins of the people and from the political struggles that marked their union with Canada of today are very much alive and yet, time and progress have advanced as quickly here as in other parts of this modern world. The result is contrast between the jealously-preserved rights of olden times and the enthusiastically accepted practices of today; and yet, as a whole, the land embraces all extremes in a distinctive and tenacious personality that is foremost in Canadian national life.

Souvenirs of the seigniorial system are full of charm, and though many have been effaced, others survive in one form or another, in the St. Lawrence valley and along the peaceful banks of the Richelieu. With the older Seigniories, where the land has gradually become acquired by the tenants and their children and their children's children and so prolifically down through the generations, the identity of the once vast estates has been completely lost, as, for instance, that of the Seigniory once controlling the Island of Montreal, though a few nominal rents are still collected and the relationship between Seigneur and habitant is maintained. The younger properties are likely to be in a better state of territorial preservation and the Seigniory of La Petite Nation on the north shore of the Ottawa River is a good example of this. It is worth some study and investigation as a survival of this ancient system of tenure and social life and as an interesting modern Canadian development in itself.

Though we may class it with the junior Seigniories, its nominal origin dates back actually to the very earliest of Canadian times and its short active history is indelibly intermingled with that of French Canada. Its first owner was Bishop Laval of Quebec, whose personality is entertainingly revealed by Parkman. Its most famous Seigneur was Papineau,



Honourable Louis-Joseph Papineau — 1836.

the great "Louis Joseph", whose name is so honoured in the province of Quebec. These two names alone invoke a moving picture of past times, commencing with the austere prelate, who exercised a control over the temporal as well as the spiritual temper of the infant colony, and closing with the great reformer, who was called a rebel in his day and a patriot in ours.

What a pageant of history could illuminate the progress from start to finish! First would come the indomitable missionaries, for they preceded the explorers in many instances, then, the adventurous travellers themselves, the fur-traders and coureurs de bois; and always, the Indians. Up and down the Ottawa River, whose course was and is an artery of travel giving access to the interior of Canada, the Indians of the Little Nation of the Algonquin tribe, the aborigines, saw the passing canoes of paleface and redskin. In wintertime, the ice of the river provided a road where in summer there was none and when the Seigniory itself was having its first colonists take root at the dawn of the nineteenth century, Philemon Wright and his cheery Yankee pioneers came plodding through the snows. It was they who founded the great lumber trade centering round the industrial city of Hull and the beautiful capital of Ottawa, and who sent down the first of the timber that was soon to be rafted in vast quantities. Until the railroads hurried people off by land to Montreal, steamboats plied the Ottawa and connected with a short rail line descending to Carillon, where other vessels ran to Ste. Anne's and Lachine.

If we have conceived a modern metaphor to display the share in time and history taken by the Seigniory, we must in justice close with a variety of epilogue, giving the past continuity with the future and showing its beautiful fields and forests under today's skies. Surveying the great estate as from an aeroplane, little change

Left: The Gold Room — Manor House.

Above: Manor House — February 26, 1930.

Next page: The Famous Spiral Staircase — Manor House.

would be observable. The same beautiful Laurentian hills blush with autumn, roll endlessly to the horizon in grey and white and mauve in wintertime and lose themselves in the lazy haze of summer, as the years go by. A road has been opened into the heart of the property so the great lake sprawling among the hills on the northeast corner of the Seigniory is more accessible and rangers' cabins and observation towers to guard against fire are to be found tucked away among the trees, but, for the greater part, the eternal loveliness of the hills is untouched, and man has only taken especially unto himself one small corner. Winding roads looping high to the hill-crest break the slopes commanding a panorama out over the Ottawa valley; the luxuriant green of a challenging golf course forms a curious pattern among the trees of the foothills near the river; and on the bank just west of the little village of Montebello the grounds of the old Manor House have been extended by green lawns and graceful drives to embrace new buildings, built wholly of logs, which are a characteristic of the place today. Cabins of all sizes, from great to very small, are perched unobtrusively on the hillside behind; but all of this is a mere incident in the spacious whole, and our epilogue would reveal little out of harmony with the gracious periods that had gone before.

Let us return to them to build up the chain of circumstance leading to the present day. The late Monsignor Chamberland, former curé, wrote an interesting history of his parish, and delved, moreover, into the records of the neighbouring parishes. His "Histoire de Montebello" cites the original deed* 1674 from the West Indies Company to François de Laval, first bishop of Quebec. The deed, which itself casts light on the usages and rights of Seigneurial tenure, reads in parts as follows:

"All that extent of land fronting

on the Saint Lawrence River in New France about forty-two leagues above Montreal, measuring five leagues in breadth by five leagues in depth, to be taken from the Sault de la Chaudière, commonly called La Petite Nation, going downstream along the road of the Outaouais, to hold in all seigniory and justice the said land together with lakes and rivers in all its width, including the bed thereof, shoals, isles and islands all along the front of said seigniory, with exclusive right of hunting and fishing in perpetuity on the condition to render foi et hommage every twenty years in the Fort Louis in Quebec with "Maille d'or" equivalent to eleven livres".

The territory so picturesquely described included the present villages of Papineauville, Montebello, Fassett, Plaisance (a charming name), St. André Avelin, and Notre Dame de la Paix. The Seigniory as it is today does not, of course, include all of this territory. The heart of it remains, however, over a hundred square miles in area, and extending inland from the village of Montebello.

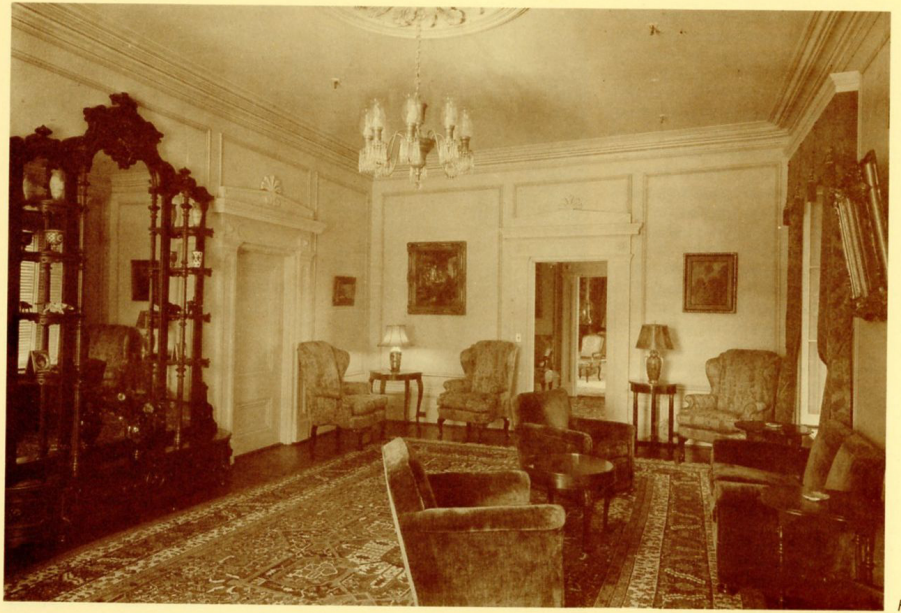
Bishop Laval gave the land, which was not to see any attempt at development or colonization for another century and more, to his most distinguished offspring and heir, the Seminary at Québec, an educational institution surviving to this day; and in 1801 it was acquired by the Papineau family. That year two-fifths and three years later three-fifths, were ceded to Joseph Papineau, member of the Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada, in return, it is understood, for legal services, though the deed of sale makes mention of 1100 louis as purchase price. It was then that its active history began.

A nucleus of settlement gathered around the first Manor House built in 1805 by Joseph Papineau at Arosen Island in the Ottawa opposite the site of the present prosperous village of Papineauville and occupied by the family until destroyed by fire some thirty years later. The years that followed saw the influx of more settlers from Montreal and other points in French Canada and the establishment of the various little communities that are there today. Developing as it did during the British regime and under amended laws, though, fundamentally French law and usage were adopted by the British following the conquest, the Seigniory did not form along quite the same lines as those that were more mature in the valleys of the St. Lawrence and Richelieu, for the north shore of the Ottawa had seen little or no farming west of the Lake of Two Mountains up to that time. The heart of it, now embraced by the boundaries of Le Château Montebello, remained with the family for a hundred and more years, providing admirable fishing and hunting country and was not encroached upon by farmlands.

The Papineau family, the first real colonizers of this vast domain, came into prominence with Joseph Papineau who was elected to the Legislature in 1792. His grandfather came from Poitou, and his father kept a cooper's shop on Bonsecours street in Montreal.

It was one of his sons, Louis Joseph Papineau, to whom he afterwards transferred the ownership of the property, whose star rose so spectacularly into the zenith of Canadian politics and history during the first quarter of the nineteenth century and burst, as it were, with such an explosion that it shook the structure of Canada almost to its foundations.

The political and patriotic perversities of Louis Joseph Papineau, most distinguished of the Seigneurs of Montebello, provide inviting material for digression. His Seigniory knew him chiefly after his career was ended; and when it had reached its climax and even when there occurred the tragedy of St. Eustache, the habitants or censi-



Former Dining Room — Manor House.

taires of the Paroisse de Notre Dame de Bonsecours de la Seigneurie de la Petite Nation were little concerned with the turmoil. Though geographically foreign to the subject, the man and his share in the politics of his day are well worth consideration.

The Rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada of 1837-1838 are of little importance in the general scheme of world history. They were a political recurrence of the general social upheavals of a few decades before and were precipitated by enthusiasts who wished to hasten the governmental growth of the country and were impatient of the sluggish minds and methods of those set to govern them by the Colonial office. Beside the growing anxiety and unhappiness sensed at large today, the political problems of those days seem almost parochial. But they were real troubles and bitterness and bloodshed preceded and resulted from them.

An opinionated review of the Rebellion and its causes can stimulate argument to this day, as the age of Papineau and Mackenzie is not so remote that some of the personal prejudices do not survive, and many of the sturdy British inhibitions that inflamed their opponents have been inherited as mental habits by their descendants.

Suffice it then to recall that the Rebellion was aroused by the granting of the semblance of reasonable representative government, while the actual authority was stubbornly held in the hands of the Colonial Office, of Governors appointed by it and of Executive Councils appointed by the Governors with the approval of the Colonial Office. Legislative Assemblies elected by the people were adroitly controlled by a Family Compact or group in Upper Canada, or thwarted and restricted at every turn by the governor and his self-interested associates in Lower Canada. There were some singular instances of fraud, corruption and

One of the many fireplaces — Manor House.

maladministration to add impetus to the debacle and an examination of all this in the light of today cannot but give one the impression that the so-called rebels had a measure of justice in their protests, though they may have been unwilling to modify their plans or accept concessions on the eve of disaster when more reasonable heads might have held to the hope of avoiding bloodshed.

A personal and appreciative sidelight on the affair at St. Eustache, one of the worst encounters of the Rebellion and taking place on a route that leads to Le Château Montebello, is "Pastor Invictus" by Walter S. Johnson, published in Montreal. It brings to life the personality of the curé of the village who watched with alarm and anxiety the gathering of trouble in his parish and who did his best to restrain the malcontents and propitiate the authorities. He was a quaint but heroic figure and the scars that are to be seen on the church in St. Eustache to this day and Drummond's verses "de Papineau Gun" become more interesting and real after meeting him in this genuinely graceful contribution to Canadian literature.

"After having said farewell to politics in 1854" says Alfred Decelles, "Papineau retired to his manor house and there remained until death closed his career in 1871". Here it is that, during the period of his life subsequent to his return to Canada, we find his character most attractive. In the midst of his books, in communion with his favourite authors, he shows himself with the captivating countenance which was natural to him, but which the struggles incident to his active political life in the earlier years of his homecoming, had many a time shrouded in gloom. In friendly intercourse, he was in his day one of the most amiable of men. An accomplished man of the world, he exhibited in social life all the grace and ease of manner of a grand seigneur. His condescension towards his inferiors, his respectful affability and courtesy in conversing with women, and his many other social qualities made him a most fascinating companion. He cultivated successfully that exquisite grace of perfect courtesy, so rare in our day, and which can hardly be expected to flourish at its best in our democratic atmosphere. He was like a survival of a former age. From his father, who had associated with the Canadians of the old regime, and was reared amid the traditions of Versailles, he had imbibed the grace of manner and refinement which lent such a charm to social intercourse in the days of old. All Papineau's letters, except of course those treating of politics, breathe this fragrance of good society and are, moreover, imbued with a cordial spirit of warm friendship. Visitors who go to the Manor House today will not be sorry to behold side by side with the tribune armed for the fray, a Papineau clad in the peaceful garb of home-life in the midst

of his family and friends, revelling in the thousand details of domestic and social intercourse.

So much for yesterday; what of today? That is something of which photographs can truthfully tell more than words. The Seigniory has no longer one Seigneur, but many. Canadian and American families, live in their own residences in the great area, hunt and fish in its forest and streams, play golf and tennis in its developed section and reside in their own homes or Le Château Montebello's Log Chateau, on the shore of the Ottawa to the west of the old Manor House. The sense of maturity remains in a new setting. The log buildings fit pleasantly into their backgrounds, the golf course has found itself, and winter and summer sports of all kinds make life cheery for every generation.

The old Manor House, which the great Louis Joseph built in 1850 and which sheltered his descendants until a few years ago, survives serenely, little changed. The grounds have been kept as they were, the exterior remaining almost untouched, and the redecoration and refurnishing of the interior have been with an eye to the original arrangement and atmosphere. The building is protected from fire, against which hazard the fortress-like library tower was first built, by an elaborate sprinkler system; and some of the original wall papers and occasional articles of furniture remain as further links with the past.

The progress that has been made at Le Château Montebello during the years in the matter of log architecture is a striking development in itself. The craft of the pioneer has been refined and elaborated. Walls that are structurally sound as brick or stone and designs that partake of both Canadian and certain appropriate foreign characteristics, have been produced by the architects; and besides the extensive Log Chateau, many other attractive buildings on a more reasonable scale have been built, as well as charming cabins.

It is difficult for a writer who is justifiably prejudiced in favour of the locality to describe it with adequate restraint. Suffice to say that its future promises to progress as gently and picturesquely as its past. The guests and personnel of Le Château Montebello are keenly appreciative of the traditions of the Seigneurie de la Petite Nation and strive to preserve and perpetuate them wherever possible.

**The original document, deeding the Seigneurie de la Petite Nation to Bishop Laval, is on display at the Manor House.*

Le Château Montebello

As it was in the beginning

By Harold Lawson

The Montreal architect responsible for the design, detailed construction and structural details of all the general buildings of Le Château Montebello, gives here some interesting details of the various phases of construction resulting in the tremendous achievement which made architectural history in 1930.

The creation of the then Seigniory Club was BIG NEWS in 1930. The historical association of its site, its vast acreage, that was to serve all sportsmen, its provisions for every known winter and summer sport, the unique log buildings, miles of roads, water supply and all its physical manifestations combined, provided copy for newspapers all over North America in the first half of the year 1930. Staid Canadians, after slightly recovering from the shock that the largest resort to date was planned for the North Shore of the Ottawa river and the hinterland back of Montebello, were further surprised when building started at a scale and speed that challenged credulity.

The three buildings that really set off the fireworks were the Log Chateau, the huge garage, and Cedar Hall, a residence building for the staff. That they were all built of logs was a novelty, that they were of enormous size captured the imagination; and, that all were being erected

Above: Site of Log Château. February 26, 1930.

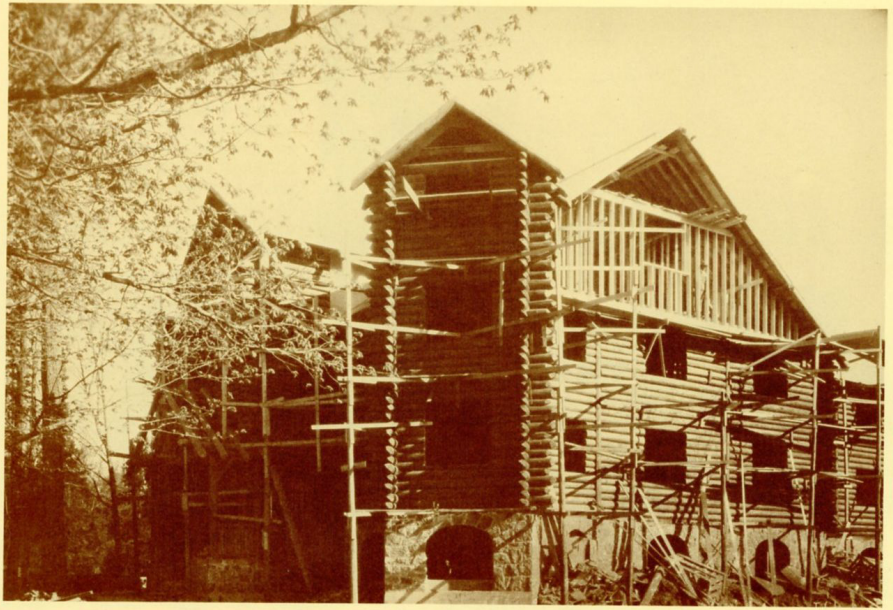
Next page: Log Château — April 3, 1930.

Next page: Progress View of Garage — July 2, 1930.

Log Château — General view from river front July 2, 1930.

at one time with miraculous speed added a fillip to the action which reporters appreciated to the full. A perusal of the newspaper files of that period reveals an abundance of adjectives and superlatives that would do crédit to a circus announcement. The buildings' construction — the whole performance, if you will — contained from beginning to end all the drama and interest of a three ring circus.

The publicity given this undertaking naturally attracted crowds, especially on week-ends. From Montreal, Ottawa and other places visitors came by train and car over dusty roads to examine the interesting construction and to marvel at the rapid progress of the work. As the buildings neared completion the excitement of the free show intensified until the grand climax was reached with the completion of the Log Chateau on July 1st, 1930. That which was impossible had been accomplished. Three huge buildings embodying a new tech-



nique (then new to this country) and containing altogether 4,000,-000 cubic feet, has been constructed within a period of four months! Let me repeat, only four months.

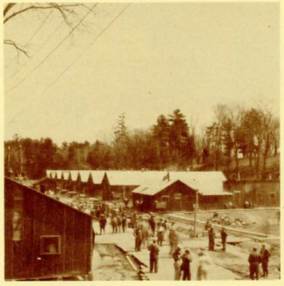
Let us now look more closely at this marvelous achievement and take note, necessarily briefly, of the preparations and organization of men and materials required.

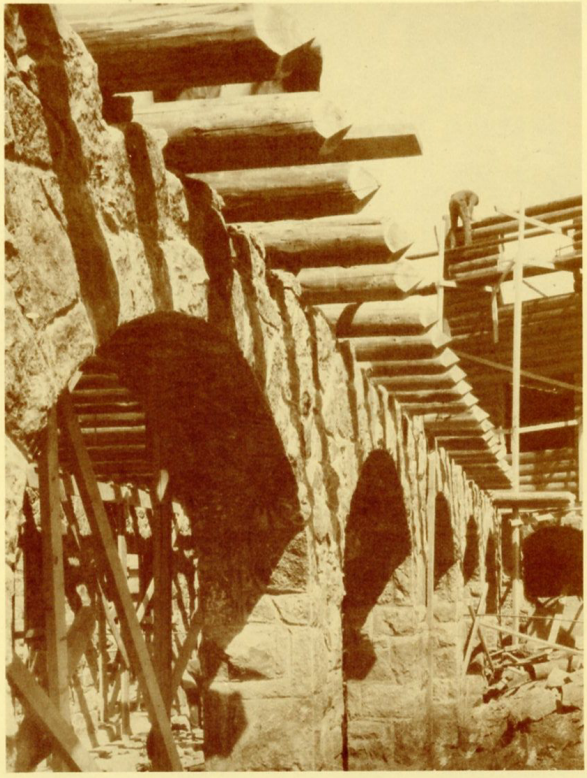
It will be obvious that such a project in a sparsely populated area would require preliminary preparations not needed in a city. Before actual construction could begin, it was necessary to build a spur line from the C.P.R. tracks to the site and erect a temporary construction village.

The spur line, 3,700 feet long, was a prime necessity, for in 1930 roads on the North Shore were unfit for heavy traffic and almost all building materials had to come by rail. During the course of construction vast quantities of materials rolled in according to pre-arranged schedules until 1,200 cars had been unloaded.

Fifteen temporary buildings were built to serve as adjuncts for construction purposes. Among these were a commissary and bunk houses. The commissary provided the workmen with three meals a day, and the number of these increased steadily until at the height of construction 3,500 men had to be fed. The special arrangements for sleeping included bunk houses at the site, 14 colonist cars, a sleeping camp at Montebello and another at Fassett. All temporary buildings within the club grounds disappeared almost over night after the opening of the Log Chateau on July 1st, 1930.

No detailed description of the Log Chateau, the huge garage, and Cedar Hall is necessary. These, in their beautiful landscaped setting, are familiar to all who have visited Le Château Montebello. But, so that you may have an image in your mind while you read the following words, the Log Chateau has a high stone and concrete basement like any

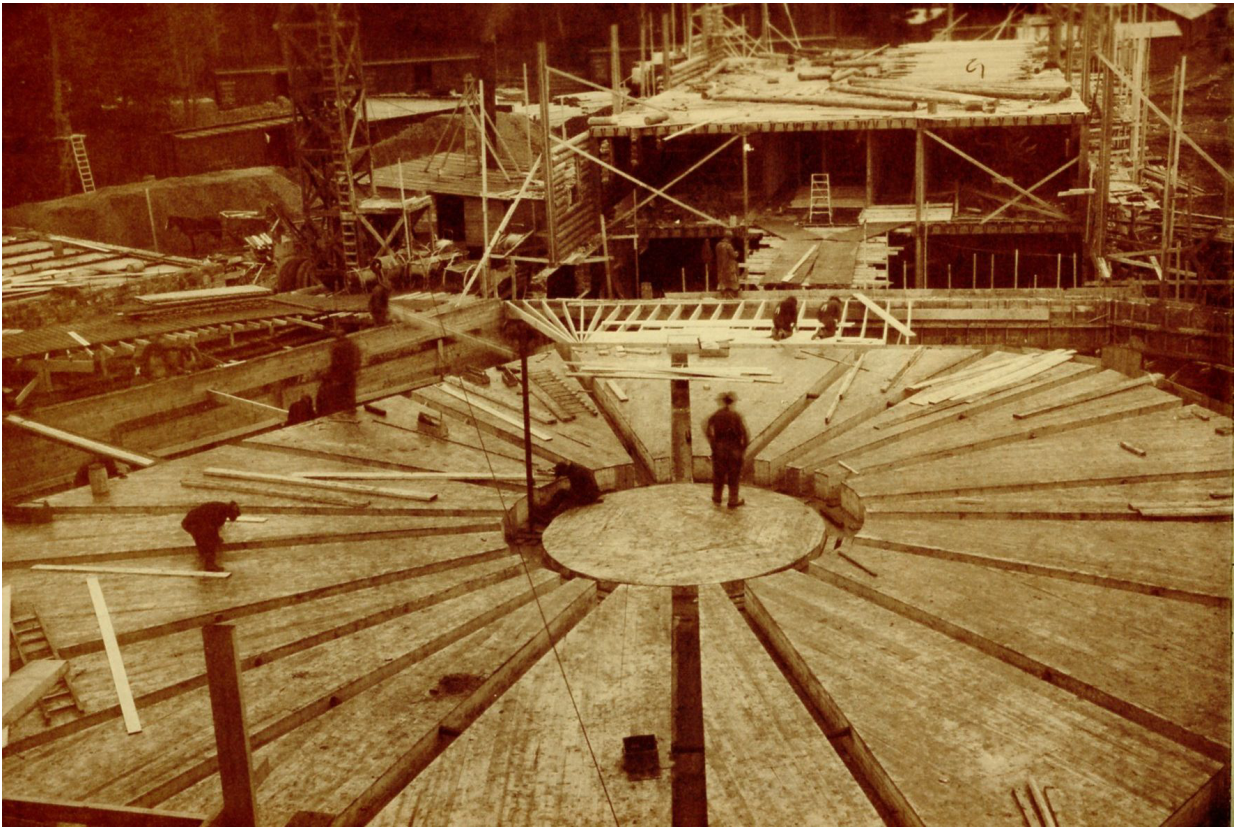




Left: End of Wing — Log Château — May 1, 1930.

Above: View of Construction Camp — May 1, 1930.

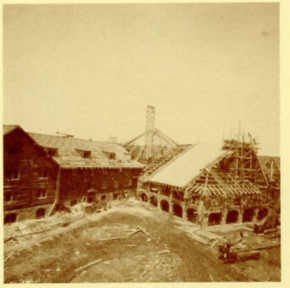
Right: Dining Room — Log Château — May 1, 1930.



other building. Above this basement all resemblance to usual construction ceases, for the upper stories of the six wings and rotunda of the Log Chateau have log walls. The large horse-shoe shaped garage with its center court and jutting wings, except for a portion, is a one-storey log structure. Cedar Hall, the staff residence, is a two-storey log building. All have roofs covered with western red cedar shakes.

Excavation for the Log Chateau began on March 15th, 1930. Skeleton drawings only were available in the beginning and instead of starting at the center and working outward, which would have been easier, the work was begun at the southwest wing, where all kitchen equipment was installed, other sections following in rapid order as the working crews increased in number. Log work started as soon as the basement of each wing was completed.

The first log was set on April

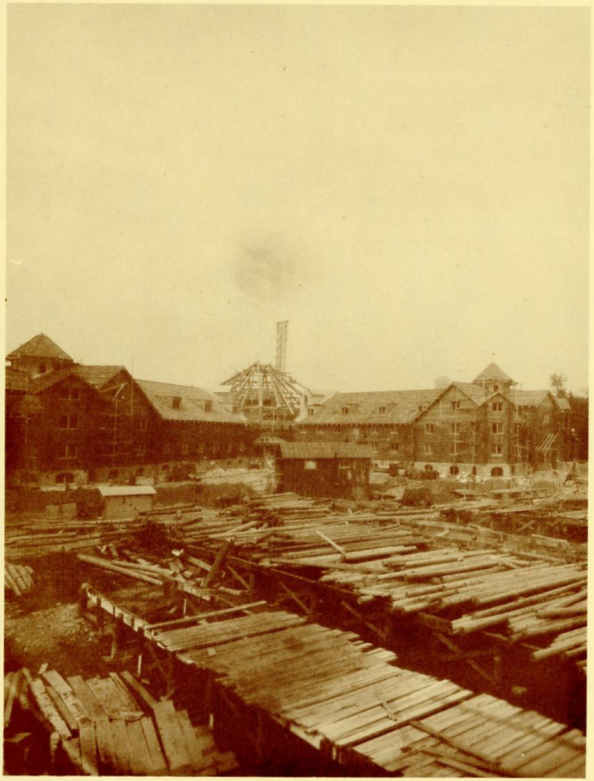


Above left: Equipment at work — February 26, 1930.

Above right: Dining Room — Log Château — February 26, 1930.

Next page: Unloading Yard for logs — June 2, 1930.

View of Lobby — Log Château — May 1, 1930.



7th, 1930, and all log work was completed by June 7th. The progress photographs on the Mezzanine give an excellent indication of the appearance of the Log Chateau with logs in place and the roofs in various stages of completion.

The foundations of all buildings and basement walls of the Log Chateau required many carloads of cement and rubble stone, and seemingly endless truck loads of gravel from a local pit; and, while these were under way, logs, lumber and other structural materials from near and far arrived by way of the spur line.

All logs (of western red cedar) were first placed on rows of skids to keep them clean and for orderly assembly-line cutting, grooving and scribing by loggers recruited from lumber camps all over the province. There were hundreds of these, mostly French Canadian, but many were Scandinavian craftsmen who had learned their trade in the old country and were skilled in log construction, particularly in the technique employed on these buildings, so different from the crude methods used in most pioneer cabins.

As this is not a technical article no detailed description of the log technique employed is described, except to note that it was similar to that which had been used in Russia and Scandinavian countries for hundreds of years and proven solid and sound, wind and weather tight, and with excellent insulating qualities against heat or cold.

Ten thousand western red cedar logs were used on the first three buildings, which, if placed end to end, would stretch from Le Château Montebello almost to Ottawa, or a distance of approximately forty miles. Taking into consideration the vast number of logs used, and as each required considerable hand labour of a precise nature, and needed moving at least half a dozen times

before incorporation in the building, it is remarkable that so much work could have been done in so short a time. In the log work, as in every other trade, in spite of the need for speed, highest standards were rigidly enforced from beginning to end.

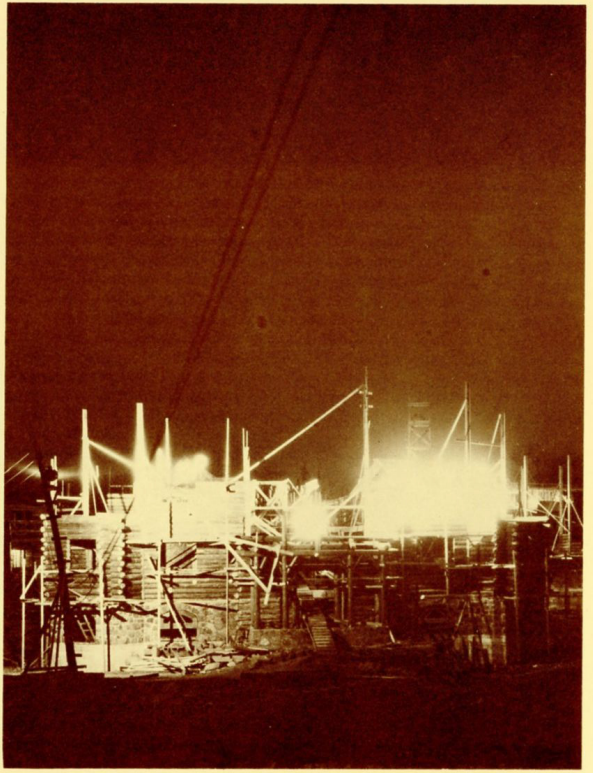
The quantities of other materials that were incorporated in these structures stagger the imagination. Seventeen carloads, or a total of 500,000 hand slit cedar shakes were used on the roofs, this being the largest order ever shipped across the continent for a single job.

There were altogether 53 miles of plumbing and heating pipes, 843 toilet fixtures and 700 radiators. Concurrently with other mechanical trades or as soon as there was space, 7,600 sprinkler heads were carefully installed in prearranged patterns to suit ceiling panels, and miles of water pipes, as well, for a complete sprinkler system. Forty miles of conduit and electric wiring were installed as well as 2,100 special hand wrought fixtures.

Then followed finishes: thousands upon thousands of yards of gyproc, 23,000 square yards of craftex, 1,400 doors, 535 windows, 103½ miles of wooden moulding, a vast quantity of finished flooring, 18,000 square feet of tile dado, and many other items too numerous to mention.

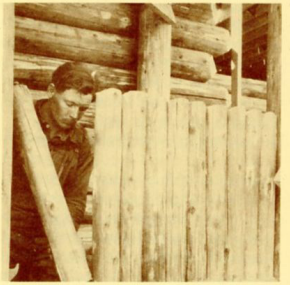
Such varieties and amounts of material could not be assembled at the right time and place except by close adherence to schedules prepared in advance and by careful co-ordination of all trades involved. In so large a project, with so little time allowed, "tight" schedules were required. As the work progressed, the tempo increased. Where more men were required they were produced and set to work. When one shift did not suffice, another was added, and a third, until, nearing the end, three shifts were employed on interior work. When daylight failed, thousands of electric lights illuminated every corner where there was work to be done. By night the myriad lights, moving figures, and shadows added powerfully to the sense of drama which this fast-moving, gargantuan project suggested.

There can, of course, be no building without architectural plans, for the conception that determines the form and detail cannot be conveyed to the builder without drawings. For reasons which are not a part of this narrative, the architects were not appointed until just before construction began, and, because of this, faced a challenge and race against time on a minor scale, but just as real, as that which faced the builders. There was little time for study or for consideration of alternative designs. Decisions had to be made quickly and there was no opportunity for change, for as soon as a drawing was completed it was in the hands of the Construction Depart-



ment and carried out on the buildings Almost a thousand drawings and diagrams were required for the first three buildings

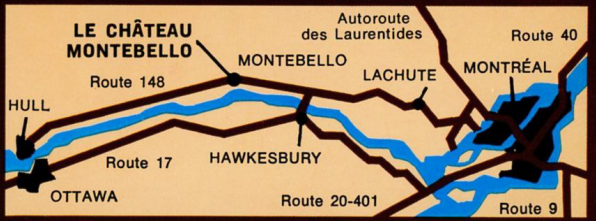
The Log Chateau, the garage and Cedar Hall have been standing for over forty-years. They have been well and truly built and it may be freely predicted will stand for generations yet to come



Left: Night operations — May 1, 1930.

Above: Placing of logs at Log Château — June 1930.

Right: Main Lobby — July 2, 1930.



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